The Long History of Billy Graham's Ecumenism

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The following was first published in the out-of-print book Evangelicals and Rome in 1999:

When Did Graham's Compromise Begin?

Billy Graham's compromise and disobedience began very early in his ministry. He was born in 1918 into a Presbyterian home and traces his conversion to the preaching of evangelist Mordecai Ham in 1934. He graduated from high school in May 1936 and attended Bob Jones College (which later became Bob Jones University) in the fall but switched to Florida Bible Institute after only one semester because he did not like the strict discipline at Bob Jones.

He notes in his biography that "one thing that thrilled me [about Florida Bible Institute] was the diversity of viewpoints we were exposed to in the classroom, a wondrous blend of ecumenical and evangelical thought that was really ahead of its time" (Graham, Just As I Am , p. 46).

It was during his time in Florida that Graham felt the call to preach. In late 1938, he was baptized by immersion in a Baptist church, and in early 1939, he was ordained to preach by a Southern Baptist congregation.

Graham graduated from the Florida Bible Institute in May 1940 and joined Wheaton College that September, graduating from there in 1943.

In May 1944, he began preaching for the newly formed Chicagoland Youth for

Christ, and in January 1945, he was appointed the first full-time evangelist for Youth for Christ International.

He was president of Northwestern Schools (founded by W.B. Riley) from December 1947 to February 1952, though he continued to travel and preach for Youth for Christ and eventually branched out with an independent ministry.

The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association was formed in 1950 and the Hour of Decision radio broadcasts began that same year. Graham conducted his first citywide crusade in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in September 1947, and his October 1948 crusade in Augusta, Georgia, marked the beginning of an openly ecumenical program. This was the first crusade that was sponsored by the city ministerial association. The Graham organization began demanding broad denominational support for his crusades.

During Graham's 1949 Los Angeles crusade, his ministry began to receive national press coverage. Graham's final rift with most fundamentalist leaders did not occur until 1957, though. This was brought about by the open sponsorship of the liberal Protestant Church Council in New York City. The Graham crusade committee in New York included 120 theological modernists who denied the infallibility of Scripture. The wife of modernist Norman Vincent Peale headed up the women's prayer groups for the Crusade. Modernists such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., sat on the platform and led in prayer. In the National Observer, Dec. 30, 1963, King said the virgin birth of Christ was "a mythological story" created by the early Christians. In Ebony magazine, January 1961, King said: "I do not believe in hell as a place of a literal burning fire."

THE COMPROMISE BEGAN MUCH EARLIER THAN 1957, THOUGH. AS EARLY AS 1944, BILLY GRAHAM WAS BEFRIENDED BY ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL CATHOLIC LEADERS IN AMERICA, FULTON SHEEN.

When Sheen died in December 1979, Graham testified that he had "known him as a friend for over 35 years" (Religious News Service, Dec. 11, 1979). Sheen was a faithful son of Rome. In his book Treasure in Clay , Sheen said that one of his spiritual secrets was to offer Mass every Saturday "in honor of the Blessed Mother to solicit her protection of my priesthood." Sheen devoted an entire chapter of his biography to Mary, "The Woman I Love." He said, "When I was ordained, I took a resolution to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Eucharist every Saturday to the Blessed Mother … All this makes me very certain that when I go before the Judgment Seat of Christ, He will say to me in His Mercy: 'I heard My Mother speak

of you.’ During my life I have made about thirty pilgrimages to the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes and about ten to her shrine in Fatima” (Fulton Sheen, Treasure in Clay, p. 317).

In his 1997 autobiography, Graham described his first meeting with Sheen, though he doesn’t give the exact date. He says he was traveling on a train from Washington to New York and was just drifting off to sleep when Sheen knocked on the sleeping compartment and asked to “come in for a chat and a prayer” (Graham, Just As I Am, p. 692). Graham says: “We talked about our ministries and our common commitment to evangelism, and I told him how grateful I was for his ministry and his focus on Christ. … We talked further and we prayed; and by the time he left, I felt as if I had known him all my life.”

Thus, Graham acknowledged that he accepted Fulton Sheen’s sacramental gospel as the truth even in those days. There is a serious problem and deception with this. While Graham was meeting with Fulton Sheen and befriending him as a fellow evangelist, Graham was assuring fundamentalist leaders, such as Bob Jones Sr. and John R. Rice, that he was opposed to Catholicism and that he was a fundamentalist. It is obvious, though, that Billy Graham was never committed to that position in his heart.

When Graham met Sheen in 1944, it was three years before his first citywide crusade. Graham had started preaching for Youth for Christ in 1944 and was an unknown young man. Why would a Catholic leader as famous as Fulton Sheen go out of his way to befriend an insignificant young fundamental Baptist preacher like Billy Graham? Graham was only eight years out of high school at the time.

Boston’s Archbishop Richard Cushing also “exercised a special influence over Billy Graham beginning in 1950.” Cushing printed ‘BRAVO BILLY’ on the front of his diocesan paper during the January 1950 campaign. In an interview in 1991, Graham referred to this as one of the highlights of his ministry:

> “Another significant thing happened in the early ’50s in Boston. Cardinal Cushing, in his magazine, The Pilot, put ‘BRAVO BILLY’ on the front cover. That made news all over the country. He and I became close, wonderful friends. That was my first real coming to grips with the whole Protestant/Catholic situation. I began to realize that there were Christians everywhere. They might be called modernists, Catholics, or whatever, but they were Christians” (Bookstore Journal, Nov. 1991).

By the end of 1950, Graham had formed a permanent team of staff members who arranged his meetings. Willis Haymaker was the front man who would go into cities and set up the organizational structure necessary to operate the crusades. One of his duties even in those early days was as follows:

> "He would also call on the local Catholic bishop or other clerics to acquaint them with Crusade plans and invite them to the meetings; they would usually appoint a priest to attend and report back. This was years before Vatican II's openness to Protestants, but WE WERE CONCERNED TO LET THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS SEE THAT MY GOAL WAS NOT TO GET PEOPLE TO LEAVE THEIR CHURCH; rather, I wanted them to commit their lives to Christ" (Graham, Just As I Am , p. 163).

In his autobiography, Graham acknowledged that he began to draw close to Rome very early in his ministry:

> "At that time [March 1950], Protestantism in New England was weak, due in part to theological differences within some denominations, the influence of Unitarian ideas in other denominations, and the strength of the Roman Catholic Church. In spite of all that, a number of Roman Catholic priests and Unitarian clergy, together with some of their parishioners, came to the meetings along with those from Evangelical churches. With my limited Evangelical background, this was a further expansion of my own ecumenical outlook. I now began to make friends among people from many different backgrounds and to develop a spiritual love for their clergy" (Graham, Just As I Am, p. 167).

Need I remind my readers that the Catholic and Unitarian and modernist "clergy" that Graham learned to love in the late 1940s and early 1950s were men who denied the very faith that Graham claimed to believe. The Catholic clergy that Graham loved denied that salvation is through the grace of Christ alone by faith alone without works or sacraments and they denied further that the Bible is the sole authority for faith and practice. The modernist clergy that Graham loved denied that the Bible is the infallible Word of God and questioned or openly denied the virgin birth, miracles, vicarious atonement, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Unitarian clergy that Dr. Graham loved were men who denied the Godhead and blood atonement of Jesus Christ and who scoffed at the infallibility of the Holy

Bible?

Why did Graham not rather love those who were in danger of being deceived by these false teachers? Why did he not rather love God's Word enough to stand against its enemies? Why did he not rather love the Christ of the Bible enough to reject those who had rejected the true Christ and followed false christs? Graham's love was motivated in the wrong direction. He loved the false shepherds, but he did not love the sheep that were led to eternal ruin by these shepherds.

Only the Lord knows how much influence false teachers like Fulton Sheen and Richard Cushing had on the young evangelist. By the early 1950s, Graham was also very chummy with theological modernists.

In a lecture to the Union Theological Seminary in February 1954, Graham testified that in 1953 he had locked himself into a room in New York City for an entire day with Jesse Bader and John Sutherland Bonnell that he might ask them questions and receive their counsel. By this action, Graham was actually locking himself into a room with the Devil, because these men were certainly the Devil's ministers (2 Cor. 11:13-15). Bader and Bonnell were both rank liberals who denied many doctrines of the New Testament faith. In an article in Look magazine (March 23, 1954), Bonnell had stated that he and most other Presbyterian ministers did not believe in the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection of Christ, the inspiration of Scripture, a literal heaven and hell, and other doctrines.

God had warned Graham to mark and avoid those who teach contrary to apostolic truth (Rom. 16:17). He warned him that error is like a canker (2 Tim. 2:16-18) and like leaven (Gal. 5:9), that "evil communications corrupt good manners" (1 Cor. 15:33), but the popular evangelist ignored the warning.

By 1950, Billy Graham had so fallen under the power of Catholicism that he turned to it for solace during an illness. During his 1950 New England campaign, Graham fell sick for several days in Hartford, Connecticut. Executive Secretary Gerald Beavan "stayed at his bedside and read to him from Bishop Fulton Sheen's Peace of Soul" (Wilson Ewin, The Assimilation of Evangelist Billy Graham into the Roman Catholic Church).

We have seen that Sheen was a great lover of Mary and was certain of God's mercy only because of his devotion to Mary. Why would a young fundamental Baptist preacher turn to the writings of such a man for comfort?

Graham's first citywide meeting was held in Los Angeles, California, in 1949. As

early as 1950 there were rumors that Graham was cooperating with Roman Catholics.

In 1950, Dr. Robert Ketcham of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches came across a newspaper article indicating that Graham expected Catholics and Jews to cooperate in a revival in Oregon and another which reported that Graham had turned over decision cards to Roman Catholic churches. Ketcham promptly sent a letter of inquiry to Billy himself. His letter brought him a strong rebuke from Graham's executive secretary, Jerry Beavan. Part of Beavan's reply was as follows:

> "For example, you asked if Billy Graham had invited Roman Catholics and Jews to cooperate in the evangelistic meetings. SUCH A THOUGHT, EVEN IF THE REPORTER DID SUGGEST IT AS HAVING COME FROM MR. GRAHAM, SEEMS RIDICULOUS TO ME. SURELY YOU MUST KNOW THAT IT IS NOT TRUE. … FURTHER, THAT YOU SHOULD GIVE ANY CREDENCE TO THE IDEA THAT MR. GRAHAM WOULD EVER TURN OVER ANY DECISION CARDS TO THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH SEEMS INCONCEIVABLE" (John Ashbrook, New Neutralism II).

Graham was soon openly doing what Mr. Beavan labeled "ridiculous" and "inconceivable." On Sept. 6, 1952, reporter William McElwain, writing for the Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph, remarked on Graham's ecumenical activities with Rome:

"Graham stressed that his crusade in Pittsburgh would be interdenominational. He said that he hopes to hear Bishop Fulton J. Sheen at one of the Masses at St. Paul's Cathedral tomorrow. Graham said, 'Many of the people who have reached a decision for Christ at our meetings have joined the Catholic church and we have received commendations from Catholic publications for the revived interest in their church following one of our campaigns. This happened both in Boston and Washington. After all, one of our prime purposes is to help the churches in a community.'"

It doesn't sound to me that Dr. Ketcham's aforesaid questions were ridiculous. Graham publicly admitted he was already turning seekers over to the Catholic Church in the early 1950s.

In an interview with the Religious News Service in 1986, the 67-year-old Billy Graham admitted that his ministry was deliberately ecumenical even in the early days. He told the interviewer that one of his “very close advisers and friends” was the aforementioned Dr. Jesse Bader, a liberal Disciples of Christ clergyman who was secretary of the radical National Council of Churches (Christian News, March 31, 1986).

Since then, Graham has moved ever closer into fellowship with Roman Catholicism and theological modernism. As John Ashbrook, author of New Neutralism II: Exposing the Gray of Compromise, observed, “Compromise takes a man farther than he intends to go.” The Bible warns that “evil communications corrupt good manners” (1 Cor. 15:33).

How have Graham’s ecumenical relationships affected him? The January 1978, issue of McCall’s magazine contained an interview with Graham by James Michael Beam. Graham admitted his change in thinking:

> “I am far more tolerant of other kinds of Christians than I once was. My contact with Catholic, Lutheran and other leaders–people far removed from my own Southern Baptist tradition–has helped me, hopefully, to move in the right direction. I’ve found that my beliefs are essentially the same as those of orthodox Roman Catholics, for instance. They believe in the Virgin Birth, and so do I. They believe in the Resurrection of Jesus and the coming judgment of God, and so do I. We only differ on some matters of later church tradition.”

This is strange talk. The errors of the Roman Catholic Church are not mere matters of “later church tradition.” Roman Catholicism is the utter perversion of the gospel and of the New Testament church by the intermingling of biblical truth with paganism and Judaism. Rome’s false sacramental gospel of grace plus works requires that we label it cursed of God (Gal. 1:6-10); but Dr. Graham long ago determined to look upon Roman Catholicism as true Christianity, and he has led multitudes astray by that decision.

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